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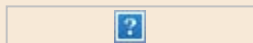
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July 2, 2015

In this Issue



Remembering Mitch Snyder



A personal note on a national hero

Philip Mangano

This week will commemorate the 25th anniversary of Mitch Snyder's passing. I remember well the day I heard that news. I was the Director of Homeless Services for the City of Cambridge and part of a recently created advocacy group in the Boston area. As he was for so many, Mitch inspired us to believe that advocacy could work. We had seen him sleeping on the grates, testifying in Congress, tangling with the President, fasting to the brink of death.

He was the "public voice and face," as the New York Times called him, of an issue, and we've not seen another capture the imagination and focus the attention as he did. He was human. He missed on a few issues. He seemed too radical for some. His civil disobedience offended others.

But in those days, it was impossible not to appreciate what he meant for an issue that struggled to reach public policy action, even as it reached public attention.

He learned to be a person of faith and reflection from Daniel and Philip Berrigan when he met them in prison. He was supported by a coterie of celebrities that saw in him an earnestness and savviness on behalf of the poorest.

For all his disputations with President Reagan, he secured a cosmic balance with the approval of President Bartlett, West Wing's Martin

Sheen.

That was standard for Mitch. Disdained by some, loved by others. Sheen played Mitch in a bio-movie entitled Samaritan.

He argued with the administration, prodded the Congress, and slept on the streets with some of them, and inspired thousands of us with his take-no-prisoners rhetoric and let-go-of-life multi-week fasts.

We are left to wonder what he would think of the "new" advocacy. Cozying up to government, computing the costs, implementing Housing First. He would certainly not be enamored of Point in Time counts, give his admonitions for homeless people not to participate in the Census count of homeless people conducted by the Census Bureau in 1990. He warned it would be an undercount. Sound familiar?

For those of us who believe that numbers - whether in cost benefit studies or in data collection - are central to securing resources for solutions to homelessness, we might have been the target of his condescension.

His massive CCNV shelter won by his fasting, is now the kind of program we work assiduously to end. His harshness with public officials would not wear well with current DC-based advocacy. His brand of civil disobedience which included building break-ins and prophetic actions, is passé.

Given that "old school" approach, he may have been problematic for many.

I only met him a few times. Once fleetingly at the Housing Now march in 1989 when he and others gathered homeless people, Coretta Scott King, Stevie Wonder, Jefferson Airplane, Susan Sarandon, Jon Voight, Vidal Sassoon (!), and about 70,000 others to rally for housing for homeless people. That was 26 years ago.

The other time was in Cambridge when I was Director of Homeless Services with the city and had been tasked with negotiating with MIT on some property. Mitch was invited up. He looked tired and worn. He was somber. Offered some advice and went back to Washington.

He deserved to be tired. He had been carrying the public issue of homelessness on his back for a decade.

He faced hostility, misunderstanding, betrayal, and kept going.

He fasted to near death twice.

He experienced disappointment and disdain.

But he kept going.

He has taken his place in the firmament of legends in our country who fought against social wrong. He was restless for justice. He laid down his life for our homeless neighbors. They loved him for his

companionship and sacrifice. And we do, too.

His ways may have been problematic, but his heart was true. For those seeking justice for our homeless neighbors, he remains our North Star.

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